

PROSTITUTES

DRAWER 3A

PERSONALITY

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Abraham Lincoln's Personality

Prostitutes

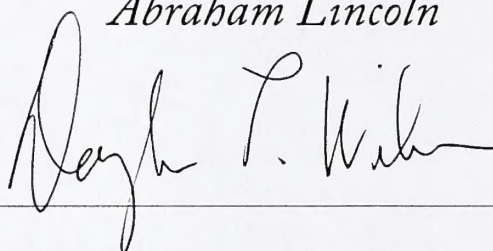
Excerpts from newspapers and other
sources

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

HONOR'S VOICE



*The Transformation of
Abraham Lincoln*

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Douglas L. Wilson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a horizontal line drawn underneath it.

DOUGLAS L. WILSON



Alfred A. Knopf / New York / 1998

women of Springfield's upper crust. If he wanted to be accepted, he didn't seem able to adopt the necessary behavior. Speed believed that part of Lincoln's distinctiveness was that he was incapable of playing a role. "He could act no part but his own. He copied no one either in manner or style."³¹

Late in his life William H. Herndon confided to a correspondent that "Lincoln had a strong if not a terrible passion for women: he could hardly keep his hands off from women and yet much to his credit he lived a pure and virtuous life while married."³² But scarcely a hint of this person ever appears in accounts of Lincoln's several courtships or his relations with other young women to whom he may have been attracted. This is not surprising given the inhibitions that could be expected to govern most Victorian informants on such a subject, particularly where the reputation of a great national hero was at stake. Silence may just as easily indicate a lack of substance as discretion, but at least for Herndon, referring to Lincoln's strong sexual attractions was a way of emphasizing his honorable restraint.

While it is true that he was speaking of Lincoln's fidelity to his marriage vow, the honorable restraint that Herndon refers to seems to have been present in Lincoln's bachelor years, and it may have been related to his feelings about seduction, a subject that seems to have offended his sense of justice. Though extramarital sex was considered immoral for both sexes, women who yielded to temptations were judged more harshly and stood to lose much more than their male partners if discovered. It is a measure of Lincoln's discomfort with this sort of double standard that sometime during this same period he composed a poem for his male companions with the theme that no woman ever fell alone.

Whatever Spiteful fools may Say –
Each jealous, ranting yelper –
No woman ever *played* the *whore*
Unless She had a man to help her.³³

More than his lighthearted advocacy of women's suffrage, we may see here Lincoln's sympathy with the plight of women and the pronounced sense of injustice it could evoke in him, but it is not an outright condemnation of extramarital or professional sex.

Herndon once described for the young man who was to become his collaborator some circumstances from this phase of Lincoln's life. "Lincoln came to this city in 1837 and from that time to 1843–44 he and Speed were quite familiar, to go no further, with the women. I cannot

tell you what I know, especially in ink. Speed was a lady's man in a good and true sense. Lincoln only went to see a few women of the first class women of sense. Fools ridiculed him; he was on this point tender footed."³⁴ This is far from a clear picture, but it is obvious what Herndon is hinting at: that Lincoln and his friend Speed, during their early bachelor days, were involved with women in ways that could not be written about, while Lincoln's encounters with fashionable women were few and painful.

After they had worked together for several years on their Lincoln biography, Herndon offered his collaborator an anecdote that presumably enlarges on the earlier hint.

Mr. Speed told me this story of Lincoln. Speed about 1839–40 was keeping a pretty woman in this City and Lincoln desirous to have a *little* said to Speed – "Speed, do you know where I can get *some*, and in reply Speed said – "Yes, I do, & if you will wait a moment or so I'll send you to the place with a note. You can't get *it* without a note or by my appearance". Speed wrote the note and Lincoln took it and went to see the girl – handed her the note after a short "how do you do &c.", Lincoln told his business and the girl, after some protestations, agreed to satisfy him. Things went on right – Lincoln and the girl stript off and went to bed. Before anything was done Lincoln said to the girl – "How much do you charge." "Five dollars, Mr. Lincoln." Mr. Lincoln said – "I've only got \$3." Well said the girl – "I'll trust you, Mr. Lincoln, for \$2. Lincoln thought a moment or so and said – "I do not wish to go on credit – I'm poor & I don't know where my next dollar will come from and I cannot afford to Cheat you." Lincoln after some words of encouragement from the girl got up out of bed, – buttoned up his pants and offered the girl the \$3.00, which she would not take, saying – Mr. Lincoln – "You are the most Conscientious man I ever saw."³⁵

This story sounds so much like a deliberate parody of the Honest Abe Lincoln legend that most writers have refused to take it seriously, but this "preposterous story," as one writer has called it, has a credible basis and merits consideration.³⁶ Herndon himself was aware of how doubtful this hilarious story appears at first glance, for he took the trouble to explain how it had gotten out and to assure Jesse Weik that he regarded it as reliable: "Speed had occasion to go and see the girl in a few days, and she told him just what was said and done between herself & Lincoln and Speed told me the story and I have no doubt of its truthfulness."³⁷

Herndon and Speed both are decidedly friendly witnesses where

Lincoln is concerned, and this is clearly an insider's story, not intended for the public or for those who would use it against him. Since it would be unthinkable to include it in their biography, Herndon appears to have had no other motive in telling his collaborator this story than that he regarded it as true, and perhaps with the suggestion that it captured their hero in an embarrassing but highly revealing situation. Indeed, it exemplifies what Herndon could only hint at in his earlier letter: that Lincoln was awkward with women and that unlike his friend Speed, who was an accomplished ladies' man, even Lincoln's attempts at a more businesslike relationship were plagued by anxiety and irresolution.

In fact, the story accords very well with the picture of Lincoln's behavior in other accounts of the period. He was obviously unsure of himself with young women of the class he aspired to, and this may have led him to seek other outlets for his sexual appetites. That he should ask his close friend Speed for help appears logical, particularly if Speed had already made provision for the satisfaction of his own appetites. That Lincoln should underestimate what such an assignment would cost seems almost inevitable, considering his relative inexperience and unworliness, not to mention his conspicuous lack of a keen fiscal sense. Finally, his panicky decision to bail out at the mention of credit may be comic, but it can hardly be said to be out of character. At Speed's store he was as reluctant to get into his own bed on credit as he was with Speed's mistress.

But was the young Abraham Lincoln capable of consorting with a prostitute? Herndon, who knew him well, thought he was, and there are other indications that point in the same direction. We have seen that Lincoln told Herndon that he thought he contracted syphilis from a woman, presumably a prostitute, in Beardstown in the 1830s. John T. Stuart told Herndon that he and Lincoln, while staying in Galena, Illinois, during the Black Hawk War in the summer of 1832, "went to the hoar houses." His qualification – that "All went purely for fun – devilment – nothing Else"³⁸ – is open to the suspicion, at least, of being perfunctory, and the demurrer itself can be read as deliberately ambiguous, the kind of lawyer's denial that actually denies nothing.

It might be argued that for a young man aspiring to raise his social status, Lincoln would, if only as a practical matter, avoid such situations, just as he avoided fighting, drinking, and the use of tobacco. But visiting prostitutes was not strictly identified with lower-class behavior,

as the examples of Speed and Stuart would suggest. It is, in fact, possible to see in Lincoln's debacle with Speed's mistress a kind of inadvertent social climbing, like frequenting a fashionable restaurant without realizing how expensive the food is until presented with a menu.




WHERE LINCOLN *was* sure of himself was with the younger people of the town. Known in New Salem for his way with children, Lincoln endeared himself to the youth of Springfield as well. In the 1890s, Ida Tarbell took notes on the recollection of a woman who grew up in Springfield about this time. "She remembers Mr L. as a little girl. He once she & her sister were going away for a trip for the first time alone. The dray did not come for their trunks and they thought they were going to be left – stood at gate crying. Mr L. came along & said Why girls Whats the matter? They told him – How large a trunk is it? They took told him & he said 'Dont you cry any more' picked it up and carried it off 3 blocks on his shoulders to depot." This was not an isolated act of kindness. Tarbell's notes continue: "He used to take all the children of the neighborhood to circus. First time Mrs E. heard Ole Bull. Mr L. took her."³⁹

It is not surprising that he was popular with the young men of the town, who admired his readiness with a funny story and his conspicuous ability in athletics. James Gourley, who later became a neighbor of the Lincolns, especially remembered the latter.

I Know when Lincoln Came to this City – in 1837 – probably in May 1836. We played the old fashioned town ball [an early version of baseball] – jumped – ran – fought & danced. Lincoln played town ball – he hopped well – in 3 hops he would go 40.2 on a dead level. He was a great wrestler – wrestled in the black Hawk war: his mode – method – or way – his Specialty was Side holds: he threw down all men. Lincoln was a good player – could catch a ball: he would Strip and go at it – do it well –⁴⁰

Milton Hay, who later became a leading Springfield attorney, remembered Lincoln as a regular source of fun and stories. "Matheny was deputy clerk under Butler. Jim and I with other boys had been cronies – we were in the habit of running about together as boys do nights and Sundays, and we made the Clerks office a sort of headquarters. . . . Lincoln would often drop in on us. I remember the general impression I have that it was always a great treat when Lincoln got



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